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The Serious Side of Being Funny

WINDOW ROCK, AZ. – “If looks could kill.”

That is more than a cliché for James Junes and Ernie Tsosie III who are the only Native American and Navajo comedy duo in the country.

In fact, they know that one straight face don’t stop no show.

“It use to throw us off when people didn’t laugh, but we finally realized that people are laughing on the inside,” said Tsosie. “We learned that people’s faces can be deceiving...we learned that after years of performing.”

They have been performing together for the past 10 years.

Reflecting back, Junes remembers when they had an eye-opening experience during a conference in Albuquerque in their early years.

“We were thrown to the wolves, and they didn’t get our jokes,” Junes said. “I was wearing my traditional attire, but they were expecting us to wear buckskin and feathers. We were not what they were expecting. I was deeply hurt and it was one of the most humiliating things I went through.”

After the performance, Junes said he began to rethink his future as a comedian, noting, “After coming off a bad show, I wanted to quit.”

Tsosie and Junes came from the school of hard knocks so they knew quitting was not an option. After all, if they could overcome alcoholism, they could surely deal with a room full of serious faces.

Soon after that, they were invited to attend the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco, which Junes said could not have happened at a better time. It was an event that projected them to a new level.



“We delivered one of the most unbelievable shows in my career, and I was in tears,” Junes said. “The people in San Francisco were diverse, and they accepted me as me. People don’t realize what kind of struggles we had to go through.”

Junes said there are no books or material that could have prepared them for their eye opening experience in Albuquerque, but they are grateful for the knowledge they have gained.

“We learned that it’s how we pick up ourselves that measures success,” Junes said.

They both agree that the greatest challenge in their personal life was overcoming alcohol.

Tsosie said, “I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired,” adding, “I didn’t want my son to grow up around alcohol like I did.”

Junes echoed similar thoughts, and said, “I was being controlled by alcohol. I talked to myself and said there has to be more to life than this. I didn’t even think about wanting to be sober, I just wanted to live. My heart was talking to me.”

Today, Junes said he is a clown at a different kind of party.

Moreover, Junes and Tsosie said there is also a serious side to being funny.

“Our job is to make people laugh, but we realize that we’re also changing lives” said Tsosie. “I remember one lady who credited us for helping her overcome depression.” He explained that after looking at their DVD several times, she slowly began to smile and eventually started laughing.

“That is very personal and something that I will never forget,” said Tsosie, adding, “We’re having a positive impact upon people’s lives. They are getting sober, they are getting inspired, and it is amazing.”

Junes added, “Even if one life is turned around, it is worth it. I wish there was somebody to encourage me.”

Tsosie said, “Humor works both ways. It is like therapy, not just for the audience, but for us as well.”

The highlight of their career was when they performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.



“We’ve learned how to deliver differently and transitioned over the years,” Junes said. “We think on the fly and can be totally improvisational. Our shows have become more spontaneous, which makes it more natural.”

Their ultimate goal is to have their own Navajo sitcom on national TV in the U.S. With their steadfast dedication and determination, their dream may soon become a fruition.

Junes and Tsosie will provide the opening act for Creedence Clearwater Revisited during the July Fourth Celebration and PRCA Pro Rodeo in Window Rock, Arizona on July 3rd beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Navajo Nation Fairgrounds. For more information, contact Delilah Goodluck, Public Information Officer at (928) 871-6632 or www.navajonationfair.com